

Fam-Med: An Internet Resource for Family Physicians

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Advances in computer networks and telecommunication technology have dramatically improved our ability to exchange information with colleagues without regard to distance. At first this ability was limited to individuals affiliated with academic centers. Commercial networks such as CompuServe, MCIMail and Delphi have arisen to provide both similar and enhanced services to interested parties for a fee. Recently, these vendors have started to establish "gateways" to the educational network so that electronic mail may be exchanged and resources may be shared between users of the different systems. Finally, with the opening of the "Internet" to commercial traffic and the passage of a bill in Congress to develop a National Information Infrastructure, an increasing number of government and commercial organizations are taking advantage of this ability to participate in what has become a global network. As a result of this growth, more health related resources are appearing on the Internet every day.

This paper describes an ongoing project designed to assemble information available on this network useful to the family physician and present it in such a fashion that it may be easily accessed.

INTRODUCTION

Fam-Med is an electronic conference and file area which has as its focus the use of computer and telecommunication technologies in the teaching and practice of Family Medicine. The conference and files are freely accessible to anyone able to send e-mail on Internet, Bitnet, CompuServe, MCIMail, AT&T Easylink Access, SprintMail, America Online, Byte Information Exchange, Delphi, GENie, FidoNet and several other information services.

STRUCTURE

Fam-Med provides several distinct services: an electronic discussion group, discussion archive, resource archive, software reviews, a membership database and a gopher site. The system is maintained on a NeXT (ftp.gac.edu) at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. The files are located in the subdirectory pub/fam-med.

Electronic Discussion Group

Fam-Med began as an unmoderated electronic discussion group in which messages sent to the list were immediately distributed to all subscribers without human intervention. It now offers a digest version of the list in which messages are compiled and erroneous posts deleted. The digest is distributed to the list on a regular basis. Issues discussed on Fam-Med have included computerization of the patient record, ambulatory care information systems, data security, teleconsulting, on-line information resources and

voice entry systems. Our perspective is one of the sometimes rural sometimes (sub)urban family physician / primary care provider.

Discussion Archive

Fam-Med has archived all messages sent to the list since it was started in November of 1990. These are stored in two formats. In one subdirectory, messages appear in digest form arranged chronologically. In another subdirectory messages are grouped into files by topic. Topic compilations and chronologic digests can be retrieved with anonymous FTP. The Internet Gopher can be used to search for key words in messages which can then be either read online or retrieved.

Resource Archive

Fam-Med maintains a number of resources useful to the family physician. This list includes medical informatics bibliographies, a list of medically related bulletin boards, a list of federal bulletin boards and document describing economical methods for obtaining access to the Internet.

Software Reviews

Fam-Med maintains a subdirectory of software reviews. We have received permission to publish reviews which have appeared in the Journal of Family Practice and hope to add reviews from other journals as well. These articles may be retrieved via FTP or Gopher.

Gopher Server

Fam-Med utilizes the Internet Gopher to create direct links to both local and distant resources on the Internet. These items appear on a hierarchical menu from which the user may retrieve any item by selecting it. This allows the user at either a local or distant site to retrieve Internet resources without needing to know the details of anonymous FTP, TELNETting, IP addresses and subdirectory names.

Information on the Fam-Med Gopher includes the cancer information statements from the National Cancer Institute's Physician Data Query (PDQ) system, medical software FTP sites, the National Institute of Health, archives of health related discussion groups, and archives of the Health Info-Com Network Newsletter.

Member Database

Fam-Med also uses the Internet Gopher to maintain an on-line database of its membership. Individuals are listed by research interest, expertise and institution. This database can be key-word searched from anyplace on the Internet.

For more information about Fam-Med, send e-mail to: Paul@GAC.Edu or Paul@GACVAX1.Bitnet.